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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 001262

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STATE FOR EAP/MTS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/12/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: RALLY AGAINST CONSTITUTIONAL REVISIONS DRAWS ONLY
MODEST PARTICIPATION

REF: MANILA 1197 (HOUSE PASSES RESOLUTION PUSHING FOR
CONSTITUTIONAL REVISION)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney,
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Political opponents of President Arroyo who believe her supporters seek to amend the Constitution to keep her in office staged a modest demonstration in Manila's business district June 10. While the rally paled in significance and size to the People Power demonstrations that ousted previous presidents, and had more of an air of a political rally than a mass protest, the presence of as many as 13,000 anti-Arroyo protesters underscored the persistent sense of fear among the President's many detractors that she and her supporters will use any means to retain power after her term expires in 2010. It remains unclear where the current effort to amend the Constitution will lead. While the Arroyo-dominated House of Representatives passed a resolution calling for a constituent assembly to amend the Constitution in advance of the 2010 national elections, the resolution contained no details on the kinds of amendments or changes that the bill's drafters intended, and included a controversial proposal for the House and Senate to sit together as one body on an equal basis, thus blunting the Senate's veto power. The controversial nature of the constituent assembly and the desire of numerous candidates to see the national elections go forward next year suggests that the Senate will use all means to block action, and a Supreme Court challenge is all but assured. Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo privately told the Ambassador June 11 that President Arroyo had no role in supporting the resolution, and he personally lamented the decision of House leadership to pursue it. The peaceful nature of the June 10 demonstration and failure of the organizers to rally the tens of thousands of demonstrators they had predicted suggest the broader public is unsure where the constitutional amendment process is headed, and also indicates "protest fatigue" has set in after years of repeated street demonstrations. END SUMMARY.

PROTESTERS SHOW UP, BUT NOT IN FORCE

12. (C) Promising a series of protest actions to culminate with the President's July 27 State of the Nation Address, protesters opposing constitutional reform (called "charter change") rallied June 10 to denounce the House of Representatives' earlier passage of Resolution 1109, which called for convening Congress into a constituent assembly to propose amendments to the Constitution. According to official estimates, about 6,000 protesters attended the three-hour kickoff rally in Makati City, the country's financial district. While the rally attracted the die-hard members of the political opposition, leftist groups, civil society organizations, business, and religious groups, the

rally as measured by official statistics was only one-third the size of similar anti-administration rallies over the past year, although one group's statistics estimated the size of the crowd at 13,000. At a December 2008 demonstration in Makati City, 5,000 protesters gathered to oppose the draft of House Resolution 1109, which was then being circulated by Pampanga Representative and son of President Arroyo, Juan Miguel Arroyo.

POLITICS AND THEATRICALS

13. (C) With high-profile politicians and eye-catching visuals, the rally demonstrated Filipino flair for theatrics. A giant video screen showed a mosaic of the lawmakers -- labeled "Gloria's Toadies" -- who voted for House Resolution 1109. Dominant political figures, or their offspring, were well represented. Seven Senators attended, including presidential aspirants Loren Legarda, Francis Escudero, and Manuel Roxas, who vowed to block the House resolution in the Senate. Former House Speaker Jose de Venecia, a champion of charter change until his falling-out with President Arroyo in 2008, also joined the rally, while Makati City Mayor Jejomar Binay, another opposition presidential contender, provided logistical support and participants for the rally. Corazon Aquino's grandson delivered an emotional critique of the Arroyo administration on behalf of the cancer-stricken former president, while former President Joseph Estrada's son, San Juan Mayor Victor Ejercito, delivered his father's own scathing assessment.

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14. (C) There was no official reaction from the Presidential Palace. President Arroyo, who has weathered more difficult political crises in the past, recently returned from her official visits to South Korea and Russia, and will leave for Japan and Brazil next week to promote bilateral cooperation. Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita commented in a press briefing that members of the House who voted for Resolution 1109 might have to pay "the political cost come election day."

FOREIGN SECRETARY DENIES PRESIDENT BEHIND MOVE

15. (C) In a June 11 private discussion over breakfast with the Ambassador, Philippine Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo emphasized his view that the Philippine House of Representatives' moves to declare itself a constituent assembly ("con-ass") and unilaterally pursue constitutional change was "a huge mistake" that posed a "ridiculous distraction from more important issues." The Foreign Secretary went on to convey his concern that in instances where one institution such as the House attempts to marginalize the influence of others, as with the Senate in this case, it detracts from the Philippines' continued consolidation of democratic institutions. Although Romulo doubted that the House's "con-ass" initiative would be likely to get past the Supreme Court, he suggested that a preferable outcome would be for more sensible voices in the House to step forward to highlight the peril. In response to the Ambassador's observation that some quarters blamed President Arroyo for the House's actions, Romulo vigorously denied that the President had played any role in promulgating movement toward a constituent assembly.

POLITICIANS CONSIDER ABANDONING ARROYO COALITION

16. (C) Reports noted that leaders of three political parties said their groups would abandon the pro-administration coalition in the House of Representatives if House leadership attempts to convene a constituent assembly. The Nationalist

People's Coalition, the Liberal Party, and the Nationalista Party are aggressively promoting their candidates for the May presidential elections, and their party leadership expressed disapproval for attempts to cancel those elections. Despite these threats by party leadership, one member of the House confirmed that his party, the Nationalist People's Coalition, has not sought the consent of its members to withdraw from the pro-administration coalition if a constituent assembly convenes, nor has it formally declared its intention to do so.

MANILA PROTESTS ECHOED IN OTHER LOCALES

¶17. (C) Much smaller protests in at least 20 cities across Luzon, the Visayas, and Mindanao on June 10 echoed the mood of the Manila protests and reflected a diverse group of interests. In Dumaguete, Negros Oriental, protests were overshadowed by the murder that day of peasant activist Fermin Lorico by an unknown assailant. Lingayen Archbishop Oscar Cruz, a staunch Arroyo critic, said bishops were organizing protest actions in their districts, while Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines President Archbishop Angel Lagdameo called for peaceful protests to avoid the undesirable triggering of martial law. Overseas workers' group Migrante claimed to have organized rallies in other countries, and youth groups opposed to charter change launched an online campaign dubbed "Stop Con-Ass Now," which had 20,000 supporters.

COMMENT

¶18. (C) Lower-than-expected attendance at the demonstration reflects the reality that Resolution 1109, on its own, poses little threat without additional action by the House of Representatives. The next procedural action on a constituent assembly could come as early as July 27, when Congress reconvenes from summer break. At least one constitutional law expert has cautioned that the Arroyo administration has no social or moral legitimacy to support major constitutional reform during the President's last year in office, and has only the thinnest layer of legal legitimacy on which to support such changes. Even then, a Supreme Court ruling against Resolution 1109 could wipe out any legal standing for constitutional reform as envisioned by Arroyo's allies in the House. As the debate for and against constitutional reform

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lingers on, and as politicians increasingly turn their attention to their own election campaigns, the likelihood of Congress passing either contentious or meaningful constitutional reforms continues to diminish.

KENNEY